Africa: Cultural Dilemma
Fargo-Moorhead Communiversity

Session I, February 6, 1994

Traditional West African Values and World-view

I. Get aquainted.

Tell something about yourself.
Why are you interested?
Have you any personal experience with Africa or Africans?

Me: My Africa experience and African human contacts.
A dedication: Donatus Ibeakwaladam Nwoga.

II. Non-Africans and the "African Experience."

How can non-Africans -- and that certainly includes myself -- how can we talk intelligently about the African experience?

Many people, especially those of a sociological stamp and including a good many Africans, are likely to say that we can't talk about the "African experience" unless we are African and have been immersed in African values and aspirations and problems from birth. They have a good point. We all look at the world from the viewpoint of our own cultural development.

Still, each culture brings to the whole human family its own peculiar insights into the human condition and its understanding of truth, goodness and beauty. We impoverish ourselves if we do not try to listen to these other human voices. We are enriched in our own understanding of our humanity by those insights to the extent that we can grasp them.

We can never fully understand the "mind and soul" of Africa. We cannot become African, but by listening sensitively with our non-African minds we can become more complete human beings, which, I take it, is the purpose of everything that we do in the Communiversity.

II. The Cultural Dilemma: Brief Statement of the Problem

European technology and the power it represents, legacies of colonialism, have introduced a tragic ambiguity into African life. Technological power offers a level of comfort and "amenities" which would have been unimaginable in the traditional economies. Along with the benefits, however, the reorganization of life to suit the industrial system has resulted in a displacement of traditional values and identities. One of the best reflections on that traditional culture from a black American. Richard Wright dedicated his book, Black Power:

> To the unknown African who, because of his primal and poetic humanity, was regarded as a "thing" to be bought, sold and used as an instrument of production; and who alone in the forests of West Africa, created a vision of life so simple as to be terrifying, yet a vision that was irreducibly human. .
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> .

Western values have displaced, rather than replaced traditional ones, and have encroached on that "irreducibly human" vision. The two exist side by side in conflict within the same individuals and in the the societies as a whole. The result is confusion of personal identity, political chaos, and environmental disaster.

It is this conflict of values and identities which have provided the main subject matter for modern African literature, as the novelists and poets try to develop some coherent image of what it means to be African in today's world. In the process, they have a lot to say about what it means to be human in today's world. That is the question we all have to deal with.

The "Theme Poem" :*A Death in the Dawn* by Wole Soyinka

Dawn in the village -- not a cluster of houses, but scattered along a mile or more of main road.

Soft light, musical bubble of voices. Traditional greetings. Graceful, gliding walk.

The cock. The truck. The child.

Brother, silenced (enclosed) in the hug of your invention. Is this --I?

Earlier voices:

Earlier poets and African intellectuals had a different agenda as they looked at their relationships with the European world. Their colonial history had led them to think of their blackness as a mark of inferiority. Africans who had a European education began to explore the importance and value of their own race, again with that sense of ambiguity. Ideally, have I as an "educated" black man become a European encased in a black skin?

Not surprisingly, the questioning began with French-speaking Africans and West Indians.

French colonial policy -- Africans in French colonial territories wered to be French people -- of a sort. The African colonies were considered departments of metropolitan France. French was to replace the African languages. French culture to replace the indigenous cultures. A policy of assimilation.

It worked, more or less, in places like Dakar and Abidjan. Abidjan is a"little Paris," or at least it was at the time of independence.

The French colonial experience produced Africa's first world-class poet writing in a European language. Leopold Sedar Senghor (b. 1906).

First West African to earn his degree from the Sorbonne.
Deputy for Senegal in the Nationl Assembly of France.
Cabinet Minister in the French government.
First President of independent Senegal (1960).

Black intellectuals in Paris: Aimee Cesare of Martinique.

"Negritude." Not just what it means to be black, but to be Non-white."

Poems:

Experience of the First World War: Senegalese soldiers.

The stream played itself out in the 1950's and 60's. Not,"What does it mean to be black in a white world?" but "What has that white world done to us as Africans?"

Next Week:

The Lion and the Jewel, Wole Soyinka

Some questions to guide our reading of the play:

What conflicts does the play expose? Not all of them are purely African. Some are basically human.

The characters are symbolic: Each of them represents some abstract quality or point of view.

Simi
Lakunle
Baroka

There will be things you don't understand: expressions, references. After all, the play was written for Nigerians; and if you were watching the play with a Nigerian audience, you would hear roars of laughter and you wouldn't get the joke! When we talk about the play, we will try to see the humor of Nigerians laughing at their own behaviors.